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# Warm Springs Ridge Vegetation Management Project

## Record of Decision

November 2000



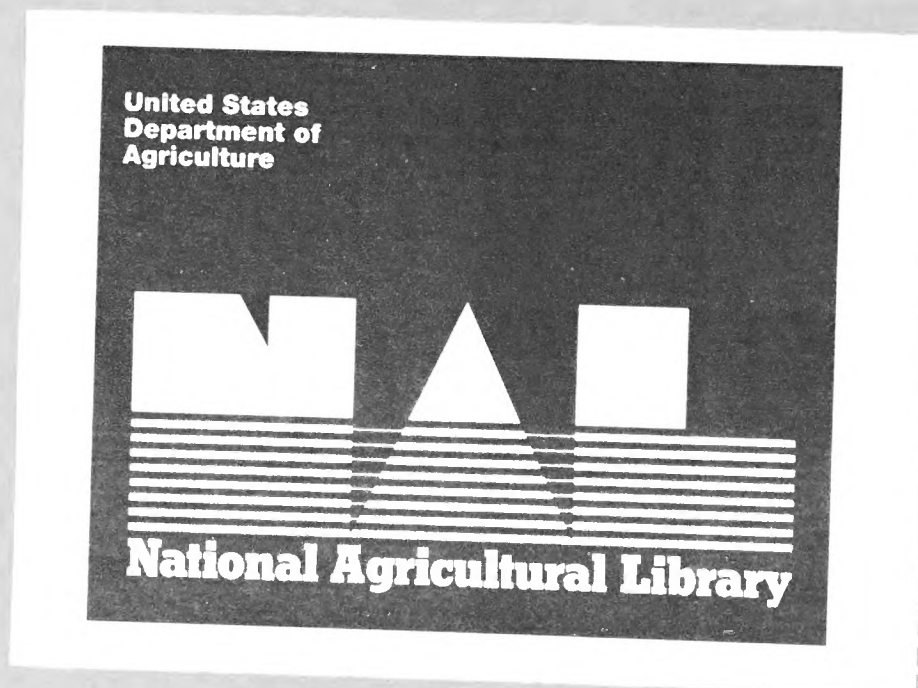
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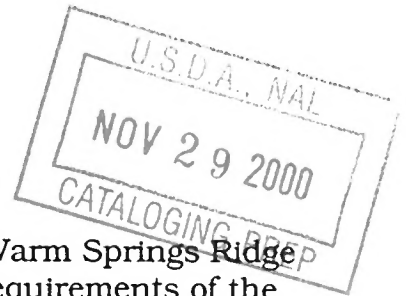
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**RECORD OF DECISION****For****WARM SPRINGS RIDGE VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROJECT**

**USDA Forest Service  
Boise National Forest  
Idaho City Ranger District  
Boise County, Idaho**

**Introduction**

The Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements (EIS's) for the Warm Springs Ridge Vegetation Management Project have been prepared pursuant to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 40 CFR 1500-1508), the National Forest Management Act (NFMA, 36 CFR 219), and the Boise National Forest Land and Resource Plan.

The Final EIS documents the analysis of a "No Action" alternative and four action alternatives to improve forest condition by reducing tree densities, and altering species composition in favor of ponderosa pine, reducing the threat of uncharacteristic wildfire conditions and effects within the project area, improving big game wildlife habitat, reducing long-term sedimentation to streams caused by existing roads, and providing economically viable wood products that will accomplish vegetation management needs to contribute to the local economy and the forest products industry.

Chapter VI of the Final EIS responds to public, tribal, and local, State and Federal government agencies' comments on the Draft EIS.

**Changes Between Draft and Final EIS**

A number of additions, deletions, updated information, and additional analysis occurred between the Draft and Final EIS. These changes are disclosed in Attachment A of this Decision. This Attachment clarifies previously disclosed resources effects, corrects and amends previously disclosed information, and updates the effects based on the best information available at the time of my decision.

- \* I do not believe that the additions, deletions, updated information, and additional analysis displayed in Attachment A resulted in any substantive change to alternatives or represented significantly new impacts than displayed in the Draft EIS. The update to the effects disclosed in the Final EIS resulting from the aforementioned changes fell within the scope of the analysis (e.g., *range of effects*) depicted in the Draft EIS. Therefore, I have decided that issuance of a supplemental Draft EIS is not warranted.

Though several changes were made, I do not believe that they were of sufficient complexity or length to warrant republication of the EIS. Therefore, Attachment A in conjunction with the Draft EIS will constitute the Final EIS. A Final EIS cover has been included in the enclosures accompanying this ROD and replaces the Draft EIS cover.

**Changes Since the September Issuance of the Record of Decision**

- \* I have decided to issue this updated Record of Decision to address the amended U.S. Fish & Wildlife concurrence of the Biological Assessment for the Warm Springs Ridge Vegetation Management Project. I considered amending the Record of Decision signed on September 25, 2000, but did not have the ability to extend the appeal comment period. There is no new information nor changes of significant effects as a result of this updated decision. The two corrections occur under the Threatened and Endangered Species section on page 7 and under



the Endangered Species Act section on page 15.

## Decision

Based on the analysis presented in the Final EIS (*the Draft EIS plus Attachment A*) and the public comments received on the Draft EIS (*Chapter VI*), it is my decision to select Alternative 2, Proposed Action, which primarily responds to the need of forest condition treatments, reduction of the threat of uncharacteristic wildfire conditions and effects, reduction of long term sedimentation to streams, improvement of big game habitat, and economically and socially contributing to the local economy. The decision includes commercial timber harvest, noncommercial timber thinning, prescribed fire activities on forested vegetation and shrublands, road construction, road reconstruction, road closures, and road decommissioning on Forest Service lands. Refer to the Final EIS, Chapter II-4 to II-6 for a detailed discussion of Alternative 2. The Final EIS, Chapter II-10 to II-18 contains the *Management Practices-Project Design Features, Mitigation Measures and Monitoring Requirements* that will be implemented as part of this Decision (*Sections 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6 respectively*).

Implementation of forest condition treatments and associated road management and prescribed fire activities, big game habitat improvements with prescribed fire, and watershed improvements will be completed within the next 5-8 years after issuance of the Record of Decision. These "projects" will be implemented under multiple timber sale contracts, service contracts, and burn plans. In addition, other wood products in the form of firewood and post and poles will be made available to the public wherever feasible and accessible upon contract activity completion (*FEIS page II-13*).

The following table provides a summary of proposed management activities to be implemented as a result of my Decision. Acres shown do not include acres proposed for treatment by the Bureau of Land Management; this accounts for acre differences between this table and similar tables and narrative in the Final EIS. Treatment of NFS lands is not dependent upon the 320 acres of the BLM lands. The effects disclosure would not be measurably different because these 320 acres represent approximately 1% of the Project Area. It is anticipated the Bureau of Land Management will issue a separate decision concerning these acres at a future date.

**Table 1: Summary of Proposed Management Activities to be implemented on NFS Lands**

Activities	Alt. 2 <i>Proposed Action</i>
<b>Total Acres Treated*</b>	<b>*13,185</b>
<b>Silviculture Treatments</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Intermediate/Commercial	5,145
Regeneration/Commercial	350
Intermediate/Noncommercial	2,535
Regeneration/Noncommercial	30
<b>Yarding Methods/Commercial</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Tractor/Jammer Yarding	1,355
Skyline (Cable) Yarding	460
Helicopter Yarding	3,680
<b>Yarding Methods/Noncommercial</b>	<b>Acres</b>

Activities	Alt. 2 <i>Proposed Action</i>
Cable/Jammer Yarding	1,350
<b>Prescribed Fire Treatments</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Silviculture Activity Fuels Underburn	7,035
Natural Fuels Underburn	1,105
Wildlife Forage Improvement Burn	4,020
<b>Road Management Treatments</b>	<b>Miles</b>
New System Road Construction	3.66
Temporary Road Construction	1.16
Reconstruction of Existing System Roads	13.5
Pre-Haul Maintenance of Existing System Roads	34.63
Closure of Existing Open Roads	4.7
Decommission of Existing System Roads	3.89
Decommission of Existing Non-System Roads	1.8

*\*Total acres treated include: silviculture treatments, natural fuels underburning, and wildlife forage burning on Boise NF lands.*

### ***Detailed Discussion of the Selected Alternative – Alternative 2***

Alternative 2 addresses the need of forest condition treatments and economics. The emphasis is to reduce stocking levels of forest stands identified as high or moderate priority, with the most economically feasible harvest method. High priority stands exhibit conditions that presently favor a high risk of developing epidemic conditions from insects/disease and the threat of a stand replacement disturbance from wildfire, as a result of density based on trees per acre and basal area per acre. Moderate priority stands exhibit conditions within 20 years that will favor the increased risk of a stand replacement disturbance from wildfire, and/or development of epidemic conditions from insects/disease as a result of density based on trees per acre and basal area per acre. Alternative 2 will move forest stand compositions, structures and densities toward historical stocking levels, and develop conditions to minimize wildfire effects throughout the project area (*See attached maps*).

Alternative 2 will also address the big game wildlife habitat need by proposing to rejuvenate decadent shrublands with prescribed fire to increase quality and quantity of forage, and to the watershed condition need by reconstructing, closing, and decommissioning existing roads to reduce long-term sediment delivery to streams.

### ***Timber Harvest and Silvicultural Treatments***

#### **Commercial Harvest**

Intermediate silviculture treatments and post-harvest activities (*slash disposal, precommercial thinning*) will take place on 5,145 acres to reduce overstocking. Regeneration silviculture treatments and post harvest activities (*slash disposal, precommercial thinning and site preparation for natural and artificial regeneration*) will take place on 350 acres of severely diseased or dying ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir stands.

Alternative 2 will yield approximately 20 MMBF of sawtimber. Harvest will be accomplished with helicopter yarding on 3,680 acres, cable yarding on 460 acres, and tractor/jammer yarding on 1,355 acres. Approximately 31 helicopter landings will be constructed and rehabilitated.

To access harvest units, 4 different road segments totaling approximately 3.66 miles of system road will be constructed. These road segments will be stabilized and closed post harvest. Approximately 1.16 miles of temporary road spurs ranging from .05 to .33 of a mile will be constructed. These temporary roads will be stabilized and decommissioned post harvest.

Approximately 13.5 miles of existing road will be reconstructed to reduce sediment delivery during log truck haul. Approximately 34.63 miles of existing roads will receive pre-haul maintenance.

### Noncommercial Thinning

Intermediate silviculture treatments will occur manually on approximately 2,535 acres of overstocked ponderosa pine stands to reduce tree competition and enable trees to continue growing at a rate nearer the capacity of the site. Noncommercial regeneration silviculture treatments will occur manually on 30 acres of poor condition stands. Cable and/or jammer yarding of material to existing roads are proposed for 1,350 acres of NF lands and will be made available for post/pole and firewood product utilization where feasible.

## **Other Activities**

### Prescribed Fire

Approximately 1,105 acres of forested stands will receive a low intensity underburn to maintain and sustain current fuel loading levels. Approximately 7,035 acres of silviculture treatment activity induced fuels will receive a low intensity underburn.

Big game winter forage improvement will be accomplished by the use of moderate intensity prescribed fire on 4,020 acres.

### Road Management

Road closures will occur on 6 different road segments totaling approximately 4.7 miles. These roads will be stabilized to minimize impacts on hillslope hydrology, water quality, and wildlife.

Road decommissioning (*remove from the permanent transportation system inventory, FEIS, Page C-4*) will occur on 12 different segments totaling approximately 3.89 miles of System roads. These are roads identified under the Forest Transportation System to provide access for commercial activities (*timber harvest, mining, grazing, recreation outfitting*), and for recreational activities (*hunting, camping, hiking, skiing, and scenery viewing*).

Decommissioning (*stabilization activities to address erosion problems, FEIS, Page C-5*) will occur on an additional 4 different segments totaling approximately 1.8 miles of Non-System roads (*roads or "routes" resulting from firewood gathering, four wheel drive recreation, or temporary "work" roads from past mining and timber harvest activities, and are not included nor recognized under the Forest Transportation System*).

## **Management Practices-Project Design Features**

Project management practices and design features that are part of my decision are described in detail in the Final EIS, pages II-10 to 16. Practices and features described in the Final EIS were common to all action alternatives and pertain to (1) silvicultural methods; (2) wildlife habitat treatment design and snag retention; (3) visual quality; (4) commercial harvest unit slash disposal and erosion control; (5) miscellaneous wood product availability; (6) prescribed



fire activities, including Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs); (7) soil productivity maintenance as it relates to coarse and large wood debris; and (8) road management, including actions to be taken related to road closures and decommissioning.

### ***Mitigation Measures***

Mitigation measures described in the Final EIS, pages II-16 to 17 will be implemented as part of my decision to eliminate, minimize, or reduce impacts of activities described in Table 1 above. Mitigation measures described in the Final EIS were common to all action alternatives and pertain to (1) public and agency notification requirements prior to beginning activities from representatives of prescribed fire activities, timber sale, service and public works contracts; (2) wildlife habitat and activity timing restrictions; (3) sediment reduction and soil protection measures; (4) recreation and timing restrictions and trail protection; and (5) noxious weed control and prevention.

### ***Monitoring Requirements***

Monitoring requirements described in the Final EIS on page II-18 will be implemented as part of my decision to ensure that project activities are completed consistent with design features and management practices, and to provide insurance that project design features and mitigation measures are effective. Monitoring requirements described in the Final EIS were common to all action alternatives and pertain to (1) tree regeneration success; (2) attainment of stocking objectives in thinned stands; (3) determination if prescribed fire activities met project fire and fuel objectives; (4) determination if prescribed fire activities met project wildlife objectives; and (5) noxious weed control and prevention.

### ***Rationale for the Decision***

\* I have selected Alternative 2 because it provides the greatest attainment of the project's purpose and need, as well as a reasonable response to the significant issue (*FEIS, pages I-2 through 6*).

### ***Response To Purpose and Need***

Seven decision criteria factors are identified in the FEIS, pages II-1-2, which assisted me in selecting my decision. These criteria were identified to optimize the achievement of the project objectives (*FEIS, page I-6*), yet avoid substantial adverse impacts to other important resource values identified by the Interdisciplinary Team and through public comments.

- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives reduces the likelihood of a timber stand replacing wildfire, and epidemic insect/disease mortality.  
INDICATOR: Amount of forested priority acres treated
- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives reduces the likelihood of an escaped wildfire beyond Federal lands which could present a threat to Idaho City and the surrounding communities.  
INDICATOR: Amount of forested priority acres treated
- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives reduces the consequences of increased sedimentation resulting from a catastrophic wildfire.  
INDICATOR: Amount of forested priority acres treated
- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives affects resource values, specifically, but not limited to, local recreation opportunities and activities, including wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities.  
INDICATOR: Amount of forested priority acres treated

- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives contributes to the economic stability of local and timber-dependent communities.  
INDICATOR: Estimated payment return to counties
- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives maintains or enhances the habitat of sensitive and management indicator wildlife, plant, and fish species.  
INDICATOR: Effects to Threatened, Endangered, sensitive and management indicator species
- ⇒ The degree to which each of the alternatives reduces the consequences on late seral wildlife habitat resulting from a catastrophic wildfire.  
INDICATOR: Effects to late seral wildlife species

Of the 14,000-forested acres, or 74% of the Project Area, Alternative 2 will treat approximately:

- 4,000 acres or 65% of the identified high priority forest stands of the project area
- 1,700 acres or 44% of the identified moderate priority stands of the project area
- 2,535 acres or 79% of overstocked 10-30 year old plantations to enable these trees to continue growing at a rate nearer the capacity of the site, and reduce the future susceptibility to insect/disease mortality
- 7,035 acres of prescribed fire of the above treated stands to reduce activity generated ground fuels
- 1,105 acres of prescribed fire to maintain and sustain current fuel loading levels to perpetuate low intensity fire regime

#### Amount of Forested Priority Acres Treated

Alternative 2 will reduce the amount of high priority forest stands from approximately 45% to 10% within the Project Area. A reduction in stand densities will reduce the number of contiguous acres of stands in high priority, lessen the risk to insects, disease, and uncharacteristic wildfire conditions, and improve overall resilience, resistance, and tree vigor (FEIS, page IV-5).

Lightening caused fire occurrence is higher on the Warm Springs Ridge area than any portion of the Idaho City Ranger District. Within the past 15 years, numerous subdivisions have been developed within and adjacent to the project area. As a result of increased population (both resident and visitor), human caused fires along Highway 21, and within the surrounding private lands have increased and are also higher in this area than in other areas of the Ranger District (FEIS, page III-8). Alternative 2 will address the concept of prioritizing fuel reduction and thinning activities in forested ecosystems adjacent to these wildland urban interface areas.

The stands currently identified as high priority within the project area have the potential to create wildfire burning conditions that involve tree torching and crown fires which promote erratic fire behavior. This leads to a concern for firefighter safety, and indirect fire suppression strategies, which result in decreased effectiveness and increased costs (FEIS, pages III-8, 9, and IV-27, 28).

Alternative 2 will reduce the amount of high priority stands from 6,200 acres to approximately 1,300 acres, and will reduce the amount of moderate priority stands from 3,900 acres to approximately 1,100 acres. Reducing stand densities as a result of tree removal, will result in more open canopy conditions. Reducing ground fuels as a result of prescribed fire will create conditions for wildfire to burn at low and moderate intensities. These types of wildfires allow wildfire heat to quickly "vent" out of the stands, reducing overall tree mortalities, increasing fire suppression effectiveness, and reducing fire suppression costs (FEIS, page IV-30).

Alternative 2 treats a large percentage (approximately 66%) of the harvest acres with helicopter

yarding system which is more costly than other systems. However, more of the high priority stands will be able to be treated with this yarding system access, which will also minimize sediment delivery to RHCAs (FEIS, Page IV-49, Table IV-18). The costs will be partially offset with 4 new road segments totaling 3.66 miles to access and provide log landings closer to the helicopter harvest acres, resulting in decreased helicopter flight time.

Alternative 2 treats approximately 4,020 acres of shrub lands considered important big game (Rocky Mountain Elk) winter forage habitat (FEIS, pages III-10 and 11). The majority of these acres have become decadent (*much of the plant dead, dying, due to age or browsing pressure*), and too dense or tall for big game to access.

A project area road condition analysis indicates various road segments located in or adjacent to RHCAs are in poor condition and contributing increased sediment delivery to streams as a result. Alternative 2 will decommission 12 segments (3.89 miles) of Forest "System" roads, 4 segments (1.8 miles) of "Nonsystem" roads, close 6 segments (4.7 miles) of Forest System roads, and reconstruct 13.5 miles of existing Forest "System" roads to reduce long term sediment input into streams (FEIS, page IV-48).

Alternative 2 will result in a net decrease of 6.3 miles of road to the existing transportation system and non-system roads, and is in compliance with Forest Plan Goals of road density (Attachment A and Project Files - Exhibit I-3, "Transportation Analysis Plan")

Multiple special use events such as mountain bike, motorcycle, and horse rides, will be accounted for. All these activities will continue to provide community stability and associated benefits to local residents and visitors throughout the year. Winter use (*Charcoal Gulch and Buena Vista ski trails and the county road #364 snowmobile trail*) will not be affected as seasonal tree removal restrictions will be instigated. Summer use (*Charcoal Gulch and Buena Vista*) trails will be temporarily closed for public safety when helicopter harvest activity occurs (FEIS, pages II-17, IV-70).

Recreation activities associated with the project area are closely tied to the forested environment, and mature forest conditions play a significant role in the quality and continuance of recreation use. All these activities will continue to provide community stability and associated benefits to local residents and visitors.

#### Estimated Payment Return to Counties

Alternative 2 will produce approximately 20 million board feet of timber products, with an estimated value of \$2.3 million dollars. The counties within the Boise National Forest will receive an estimated \$584,000 in revenues (FEIS, page IV-45).

#### Threatened and Endangered Species – (Bald Eagle, Gray Wolf, Canada Lynx, Bull Trout, Ute ladies'-tresses)

Alternative 2 will result in no effect to the Bald Eagle and Ute ladies'-tresses. Alternative 2 will result in a determination of "*may affect, not likely to adversely effect*" to the Gray Wolf. Wolf habitat will not be reduced, nor rendered unsuitable as a result of activities. Alternative 2 will result in a determination of "*may affect, not likely to adversely effect*" for Canada Lynx. The project area is not considered as a Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU). The project area is not within a priority watershed for bull trout recovery, but is considered to be nodal or migratory habitat for the species. Therefore, Alternative 2 will result in a determination of "*may affect, but not likely to adversely effect*" the bull trout. The streams within and adjacent to the project area have little potential for bull trout population establishment because of poor habitat conditions, and all streams are below 1000 meters in elevation. INFISH RHCA buffers will not be considered for treatment, thus no stream or wetland habitat will be affected. No habitat for Ute ladies'-tresses will be affected by project activities, therefore, there will be no effect on Ute ladies'-tresses (FEIS, Sections 4.4, 4.7, and 4.8, Project Files Exhibit G).

Sensitive Species – (Spotted Frog, Northern Goshawk, Flammulated Owl, White-headed Woodpecker, Tolmie's Onion, Bryum Moss, Idaho douglasia, Bugleg goldenweed, Least

Phacelia)

Alternative 2 will result in no impact to spotted frog habitat, as INFISH RHCA's will not be considered for treatment. Therefore, no stream or wetland habitat will be affected. Alternative 2 will result in no impact to Northern Goshawk habitat as no activities are proposed on the 770 acres currently identified as suitable nesting habitat (*FEIS, Section 4.4*).

Alternative 2 will result in a beneficial impact to both the Flammulated owl and the white-headed woodpecker (*FEIS, Section 4.4*). Both of these species prefer mature, open-canopied conditions identified as a project objective (*FEIS, page I-6*). Snag retention/recruitment guidelines as described in the *FEIS* on page II-12 will also insure future suitable nesting habitat.

Alternative 2 will result in no impact to Tolmie's Onion, Bryum Moss, Idaho douglasia, and Bugleg goldenweed. Prescribed fire activities may impact Least Phacelia habitat, but since fire is a natural process there will be no significant impacts to this species (*FEIS, Section 4.8*).

Management Indicator Species – (Pileated Woodpecker, Mountain Chickadee, Rocky Mountain Elk, Mule Deer, Redband Trout)

Alternative 2 will result in no impact to pileated woodpecker, mountain chickadee, Rocky Mountain Elk summer habitat and mule deer habitat. Beneficial impacts to Rocky Mountain Elk winter habitat will result due to the prescribed fire in the shrubland winter forage habitat (*FEIS, Section 4.4*). The project area supports a population of redband trout. There will be an expected (short term) increase in substrate fines, with a long-term reduction of sediment input that will improve the condition of stream habitat. Therefore, there will be no risk of jeopardizing the redband trout population (*FEIS, pages IV-41-43, and 65*).

Late Seral Wildlife Species – (Northern Goshawk, Pileated Woodpecker, Flammulated Owl, White-headed Woodpecker)

Northern goshawk nesting habitat consists of at least 30 acres of multi-story, closed canopy, mature forested conditions. There is currently approximately 770 acres within the project area identified as suitable nesting habitat. No activities are proposed for this habitat, thus no impacts are anticipated (*FEIS, pages III-13, and IV-38*). Alternative 2 will result in no measurable impact to pileated woodpecker (*FEIS, pages III-15*). Flammulated owl and white-headed woodpecker prefer mature, open canopy forested conditions. Alternative 2 will result in an increase (*currently 270 acres to 2,080 acres*) of habitat conditions suitable for the Flammulated owl, and the white-headed woodpecker (*FEIS, pages III-14, IV-39 and 40*).

### ***Response to Significant Issue***

The following significant issue was identified in the Final EIS (*see Attachment A*), which determined the scope of analysis, the development of alternatives, and was a major consideration in my decision:

- Proposed silvicultural, road management, and prescribed burning activities may result in short and long term increased sediment delivery to Grimes and Mores Creeks that could cause impairment to beneficial uses.

Project design features and mitigation measures as described in the *FEIS*, pages II-13-17 were developed to minimize effects of increased sediment delivery during vegetation management, road management and prescribed fire activities. Adverse effects of the 4 new road segments proposed for helicopter landing access is low, as these segments are located and designed to avoid RHCA's (*FEIS, Section 4.6, Project Records-Exhibits A 14, A 15 and J*). Alternative 2 will meet requirements under *INFISH* to provide reasonable assurance activities will not retard attainment of *INFISH* RMO's and avoid adverse effects to inland fish.

Fine Sediment - Alternative 2 will result in an increase in fine sediment for the first year (short term) following road related activities. After the first year increase, there will be a reduction in sediment delivery to streams (long term) which will result in less than the current chronic

levels of sediment input (*FEIS, Sections 3.6, 4.6 and 4.7*).

Pool Frequency and Deep Pool Frequency – Sediment input into project area streams will have a short term negative impact on maintenance and development of deep pools and overall pool frequency, as a result of Alternative 2. However, this will improve as the initial sediment input is flushed through the system in the long term (*FEIS, Sections 3.7 and 4.7*).

Width/Max Depth Ratio – Expected sediment input as a result of Alternative 2 will not likely affect the width/max depth ratio in the short term and is likely to improve with the expected long term reduction of sediment inputs (*FEIS, Sections 3.7 and 4.7*).

Pine 6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC Watershed – Alternative 2 results in a small short-term increase in sediment delivery due to road maintenance activities. Upon completion of these activities sediment delivery levels return to current condition levels (*FEIS, Sections 3.6, 4.6, and Project Records- Exhibit J*).

Lower Elk 6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC Watershed – Alternative 2 results in a small short-term increase in sediment delivery due to road reconstruction and maintenance activities. The sediment delivery will return to slightly below current conditions upon completion of road decommissioning activities (long-term) (*FEIS, Sections 3.6, 4.6, and Project Records-Exhibit J*).

Minneha-Wildcat, Wildgoat Deadhorse, and Gregory Johnny 6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC Watersheds-

Alternative 2 results in a short term increase in sediment delivery due to road reconstruction activities for Road 311, and reopening of existing roads. The sediment delivery levels will return to below current conditions for these watersheds due to road closures, road decommissioning activities, and site-specific mitigation measures for RHCA road crossings during road reconstruction and road reopening activities (long-term) (*FEIS, Sections 4.6, 4.7 and Project Records-Exhibit J*).

## Public and Other Agency Involvement

Public involvement in this project began in spring of 1998 when the Warm Springs Ridge Project was included in the Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). This project has appeared quarterly in the SOPA since that issue.

On June 16, 1998, a scoping letter detailing a proposed action for an Environmental Analysis (EA) was mailed to approximately 60 individuals and organizations that had previously indicated an interest in receiving notification of proposed activities on the Idaho City Ranger District. A legal notice soliciting public comments was published in *The Idaho Statesman* on June 12, 1998, and in *The Idaho World* on June 17, 1998. On December 9 and 15, 1998, and January 7, 1999 a scoping letter was mailed to adjacent landowners and any organizations that requested information on the project. Seven responses were received.

The Bureau of Land Management also expressed an interest in having the analysis include approximately 320 acres of BLM lands located within the project area and exhibiting similar management needs, of which the Interdisciplinary Team agreed to include for this analysis. Subsequent Interdisciplinary Team analysis showed this proposed action and associated analysis was of sufficient complexity that a decision was made to change the analysis document to an Environmental Impact Statement (*Project Records-Exhibit A18*).

On March 22, 1999, a scoping letter detailing a proposed action for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was mailed to approximately 60 individuals and organizations that had previously indicated an interest in receiving notification of proposed activities on the Idaho City Ranger District. A Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was published in *The Federal Register* on March 26, 1999. The BLM Cascade Resource Area sent out an additional scoping letter on April 19, 1999, to approximately 28 individuals and organizations. Fifteen responses were received.

The DEIS was made available for public review and comment on April 7, 2000 with the



publication of the Notice of Availability in the Federal Register. Legal notices appeared in *The Idaho Statesman* on March 28, 2000, and in *The Idaho World* on March 29, 2000. An additional newspaper article describing the availability of the DEIS for review and comments was published on May 10, 2000 in *The Idaho World*. On April 14, 2000, a letter describing availability of the DEIS for review and comment was placed on bulletin boards at the Idaho City Post Office, the Boise Basin Library, Clear Creek, and at the Thorn Creek Road intersection. In addition, these letters were placed in newspaper boxes and mailboxes along Highway 21 south of Milepost 35 to the intersection of Road 364, and in newspaper boxes and mailboxes along county Road 364.

The Idaho Department of Fish & Game participated in a field trip in July of 1998. The Interdisciplinary Team Leader and pertinent Interdisciplinary team members met with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on 7/20/97 and 11/15/99 to provide information on the project and answer questions. The District Hydrologist coordinated with the Idaho State DEQ representative on 2/14/00 to discuss the sediment issue and the Federal Guidelines for Water Quality Restoration (WQRP) in regards to this project.

Copies of the DEIS were mailed to 83 individuals, organizations, businesses, government officials, and/or agencies. Of the thirteen letters received on the DEIS, seven respondents supported Alternative 2, (Proposed Action), and one respondent supported Alternative 3. Two respondents centered their comments around disclosure of sediment effects, one respondent centered their comments around disclosure of effects to air quality, one respondent requested specific information and clarification on disclosures in the DEIS, and the remaining respondent recommended the project area be managed as a preserve (*FEIS, Chapter VI and Project Files-Exhibit D*).

## Alternatives Considered

Based on available data and public involvement, a full range of reasonable alternatives for the Warm Springs Vegetation Management Project were developed and analyzed in the EIS. Five alternatives were analyzed in detail, including the no action alternative. In addition to the five alternatives analyzed in detail, four other alternatives were considered but eliminated from detailed study. The four alternatives eliminated from detailed study are described in the FEIS, pages II-2 to II-3.

The four alternatives analyzed in detail that were not selected are briefly described below, including the reasons for non-selection. For a more complete discussion of alternative development, refer to the FEIS, Chapter II.

Alternative 1 (No Action) – No vegetation treatments would be implemented. Forest stand species composition, distribution, and densities in the planning area would remain outside of sustainable historic conditions. Inter-tree competition for moisture and soil nutrients would continue to weaken trees and decrease resistance to disease. Populations of tree-damaging insects would continue in overstocked stands and tree mortality would be ongoing. Douglas-fir encroachment on ponderosa pine dominated sites would continue.

Prescribed fire would not be introduced and fuel loadings in the forested stands would continue to increase. Stands would continue to be at increasing risk to intense stand-replacing wildfires. Shrub lands would continue to age, increase in size and density.

The current road system would remain unchanged. Existing roads that are having adverse effects on water quality would remain open and there would be no restrictions on use other than what currently exists.

I did not select this alternative because it does not meet the purpose and need of the project. Approximately 73% of the suited forested acres would remain classified as high and moderate priority and in the long term (20 years and greater), moderate priority stands would change to high priority stands, thus increasing the acres at risk to insects, disease, and uncharacteristic wildfire (*FEIS, pages IV-1 to IV-3*). With the mortality from insects, disease, and tree

competition, fuel loadings would continue to increase, and the ability to use effective fire suppression tactics during a wildfire would decline, thus increasing the potential for wildfires to escape onto private lands. The 4,800 acres of non forested, shrub land communities would continue to increase in woody fiber amounts, decrease in new age class developments due to full site occupancies, and in foliage amounts available for big game winter utilization (*FEIS, pages III-9 and IV-27 to 28*). Sediment problems due to Forest road conditions would continue (*FEIS, page III-23*). The socio-economic impacts associated with the wood products industry, benefits of goods and services to businesses in relation to government contracts for land management activities would not occur (*FEIS, pages III-16 and IV-44*).

Alternative 3 - This alternative proposes no new road construction. This alternative would meet the purpose and need of the project. This alternative is similar in design to Alternative 2 (*Proposed Action*).

I did not select this alternative because less acres of high priority and moderate forest stands would be treated than Alternative 2. Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 (*FEIS, pages II-1 to 2*) details specific criteria to be considered in the decision as well criteria to consider economic and environmental standards. Alternative 3 proposes the largest percentage of helicopter harvest systems, and smallest percentage of tractor harvest systems of all action alternatives, resulting in a smaller economic return with relatively the same effects on sediment as Alternative 2.

Alternative 4 - This alternative responds to the issue of sediment effects to Grimes Creek and the additional cumulative impacts of sediment increase as a result of past, proposed and ongoing management activities on adjacent non-federal lands. This alternative would not propose any activities within the Pine and Wildgoat-Deadhorse Watersheds (6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC), which drain into Grimes Creek, with the exception of road reconstruction activities on the existing 311 road of which is partially located in the east portion of the Wildgoat-Deadhorse Watershed. This alternative would not propose any big game wildlife forage improvement burning in the project area.

I did not select this alternative because the least amount of high priority and moderate priority acres of all action alternatives would be treated. Approximately 35% of the high priority stands would be treated compared to 72% in Alternative 2. Approximately 59% of the moderate priority stands would be treated compared to 75% in Alternative 2 (*FEIS, pages IV-9 to 10*). Prescribed fire would not be introduced on a large amount of high and moderate priority stands and fuel loadings in those forested stands would continue to increase. These stands would continue to be at increasing risk to intense stand-replacing wildfires. In addition, Alternative 4 does not entirely address the purpose and need of the project as no prescribed burning activities to improve big game wildlife habitat would be proposed (*FEIS, page I-5*). The 4,800 acres of non forested, shrub land communities would continue to increase in woody fiber amounts, decrease in new age class developments due to full site occupancies, and in foliage amounts available for big game winter utilization (*FEIS, pages III-9 and IV-27 to 28*).

Alternative 5 - This alternative is similar in design to Alternative 4 as it responds to the issue of sediment increase to Mores and Grimes Creek and the additional cumulative impacts of sediment increase because of proposed and ongoing management activities. This alternative would not propose any activities within the Pine Watershed (6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC), which drains into Grimes Creek. This alternative would not propose any big game wildlife forage improvement burning in the project area. This alternative proposes forest condition treatments on portions of the Wildgoat-Deadhorse Watershed (6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC) that would not contribute long-term sediment increase to Grimes Creek. No new road construction, along with an emphasis of helicopter harvest systems in the upland portions of this Watershed is proposed.

I did not select this alternative because less acres of high priority and moderate priority stands would be treated than Alternative 2 with relatively the same effects on sediment. Approximately 54% of the high priority stands would be treated compared to 72% in Alternative 2. Approximately 62% of the moderate priority stands would be treated compared to 75% in Alternative 2 (*FEIS, pages IV-9 to 10*). Prescribed fire would not be introduced on a large

amount of high and moderate priority stands and fuel loadings in those forested stands would continue to increase. These stands would continue to be at increasing risk to intense stand-replacing wildfires. In addition, Alternative 5 does not entirely address the purpose and need of the project as no prescribed burning activities to improve big game wildlife habitat would be proposed (*FEIS, page I-5*). The 4,800 acres of non forested, shrub land communities would continue to increase in woody fiber amounts, decrease in new age class developments due to full site occupancies, and in foliage amounts available for big game winter utilization (*FEIS, pages III-9 and IV-27 to 28*).

## Consistency with the Boise National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and NFMA

### ***Boise NF Land and Resource Management Plan***

The project area falls within Boise Forest Plan Management Areas (MA) #20, #23, and #24 (Boise Basin MA, Elk Creek MA, and Mores Creek MA). Each of these Management Areas has specific goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines established that supplement the forest-wide standards. A detailed description of the Management Areas and their goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines can be found in Chapter IV of the Forest Plan, and in the FEIS on pages I-7 and 8.

I have evaluated the features of my decision against the Forest Plan goals and objectives, as well as the resource standards for consistency with the Forest Plan. As documented in the FEIS (*Chapters I, II, and IV*), my decision is consistent with the Forest Plan, including the Inland Native Fish Strategy EA, DN, and FONSI, which amended the Forest Plan in 1995.

In addition, though this project does not fall within any compartments in MA 20, 23, or 24 for which forest plan defined old growth acres were dedicated, I have decided not to treat (*silvicultural treatment nor prescribed fire activities*) on the timber stands evaluated as meeting forest plan defined old growth. Therefore, these acres in MA 20, 23, and 24 (*approximately 500, 112, and 158 acres, respectively*) will remain available for wildlife habitat and for future consideration as additional dedicated forest plan old growth (*FEIS, Map Figure III-1, pages III-3, III-13 to 15, and IV-36 to 41*).

### ***National Forest Management Act (NFMA)***

*Suitability for Timber Production [16 U.S.C. 1604(k)].* No timber harvest, other than salvage sales or sales to protect other multiple-use values shall occur on lands not suited for timber production [16 U.S.C 1604(k)].

Harvest under Alternative 2 will only occur on suited timberlands. Stand examinations, conducted in 1992-98, along with on-the-ground reconnaissance by the silviculturalist verified the physical suitability of forested lands proposed for commercial timber harvest within the project area (*Project Files - Exhibit N*).

*Restocking [36 CFR 219.27(c)(3)].* Requires regeneration stocking within five years for final timber harvest on suited lands for silvicultural practices that, by definition, necessitate regeneration to achieve timber growth and yield objectives.

Regeneration stocking will occur within five years on suited lands for silvicultural practices, proposed by Alternative 2, that by definition, necessitate regeneration to achieve stand objectives. Regeneration methods and affected areas are described in the FEIS, pages II-12, IV-12 and 13. Both natural regeneration and regeneration by planting have occurred in stands adjacent to proposed stands under Alternative 2, and have been successfully re-established within five years of harvest activities.

Clearcutting and Even-aged Management [1604(g)(3)(F)(i)]. Clearcutting will be used as a cutting method where it is determined to be the optimum method. Seed tree and shelterwood silvicultural prescriptions, which are designed to regenerate an even-aged stand of timber, will be used where determined to be the appropriate methods to meet the objectives and requirements in the Forest Plan.

(a) *Determination that where used, clearcutting is the optimum method:*

Alternative 2 will create one 60 acre opening and 13 smaller openings, ranging in size from less than 5 acres to 40 acres, where less than 20 residual trees per acre (10 inch diameter and greater) will remain. The total of the proposed created openings will be approximately 350 acres. Silvicultural systems used to create these openings will be seedtree, shelterwood and patch clear-cutting used separately or in combination with each other. These regeneration systems are prescribed because no other treatments meet the Forest Plan for improving stand health and growth of stands that are currently severely diseased or have high amounts of insect caused mortality. These even-age methods are the only viable silvicultural treatments for removing severely diseased and dying trees, creating open conditions favorable for the establishment of seral ponderosa pine, while ensuring regeneration remains disease-free.

The Net Public Benefits for creating this 60-acre opening will be a landscape pattern that mimics the historic vegetation patterns, improves stand health by reducing hazards of uncharacteristic wildfires and insect/disease problems, and less susceptibility to current insect and disease problems. See FEIS, page IV-78 and Project Files - Exhibit E-29, disclosing Regional Forester approval and authorization for this opening creation.

Alternative 2 also includes noncommercial harvest by the above mentioned methods on one stand totaling 30 acres. Noncommercial treatments will occur partially in a plantation and in a young natural sapling and pole-sized stand where there are not sufficient numbers of healthy younger trees to adequately stock the stand. Treatment will be designed to make regeneration of stand possible where portions of a stand are severely diseased or dying. A new age class will be created either from on site seed sources if available, or by planting seedlings.

(b) *Determination that even-aged silvicultural prescriptions are appropriate to meet the objectives and requirements in the Forest Plan.*

The even-aged silvicultural prescriptions prescribed are the only viable silvicultural treatments for removing severely diseased and dying trees, creating open conditions favorable for the establishment of seral ponderosa pine, while ensuring regeneration remains disease-free (FEIS, pages II-12, IV-5-6, 78, and Project Files-Exhibit E-29).

Vegetation Manipulation 36 CFR 219.27(b). Vegetation manipulation of tree cover must comply with the seven requirements.

(1) *Be best suited to the multiple-use goals stated in the Forest Plan.*

The desired future condition(s) established in the Forest Plan are summarized in Chapter I of the FEIS, pages I-7 to 8. My decision best meets the described direction, goals, standards, and objectives for Management Areas 20 and 24, guided by Prescription L, and Management Area 23, guided by Prescription P.

(2) *Assure that technology and knowledge exists to be adequately restocked within 5 years after final harvest.*

My decision assures adequate stocking of all suited timberlands in the project area following reforestation efforts. The District possesses the knowledge, skill, and technology. Past restocking efforts on similar sites within the project area have been successful with 98% of areas being adequately stocked within 5 years (Project Files – Exhibit N).

(3) *Not be chosen primarily because they will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber (although these factors shall be considered).*

The silvicultural practices associated with my decision were selected based upon the stand

conditions and the need for treatment, as well as other resource concerns as expressed in the Interdisciplinary Team's deliberations (*FEIS, Sections 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, and Chapter IV*).

*(4) Be chosen after considering the potential effects on the residual trees and adjacent stands.*

The specific projects designed under Alternative 2 considered the effects of residual trees and adjacent stands (*FEIS, Sections 2.4, 2.5, 3.1, Pages IV-4 to 7, and IV-19 to 21*).

*(5) Be selected to avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.*

My decision meets the Forest Plan Standards of not detrimentally disturbing soil conditions and does not exceed the Forest Plan Standard of total resource commitment (*FEIS, Page IV-46*). Long-term soil productivity will be addressed with the management of acceptable and feasible amounts of coarse woody debris and large woody materials. These conditions will be required with specific project design features for silvicultural and prescribed burning activities. (*FEIS, Page II-15*).

*(6) Be selected to provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields.*

I selected Alternative 2 after considering the decision criteria established for the project (*FEIS, Page II-1 and II-2*), the project objectives (*FEIS, Page I-6*), and the effects of the afore mentioned concerns (*FEIS, Chapter IV*).

*(7) Be practical in terms of transportation and harvest requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration.*

Alternative 2 is clearly implementable. My decision reflects the thorough analysis (*FEIS, Pages IV-44-46, Project Records-Exhibits A14, A15, I1, I2, and I3*) to ensure only feasible and acceptable transportation and harvest practices/methods were proposed, of which can be practical to prepare, layout and administer.

## Consistency with Other Laws and Policies

### ***American Indian Treaty Rights***

Alternative 2 will not conflict with any treaty provisions (*Project Files Exhibit C16*).

### ***Clean Air Act***

The Montana/Idaho Airshed Monitoring Unit is a regulatory group that coordinates smoke emissions by management ignited prescribed fire, with the intent of limiting emissions to meet state and federal air quality regulations. All prescribed burning will be authorized by this Unit prior to ignition, (*FEIS, Page II-13*).

Based on smoke dispersion modeling (NFSPUFF model v. 1.21), no violations of current National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) will occur or affect communities adjacent to the project area. However, based on local experience, a one to two day degradation of air quality will be expected in local communities. Prevailing daytime winds are west to southwest, which flows towards Idaho City, Centerville, and the Highway 21 corridor. Early morning smoke intrusions will be anticipated in these areas during the ignition periods, (*FEIS, Section 4.3*).

The Sawtooth Wilderness Class I Airshed, which is approximately 40 air miles downwind, will be temporarily affected. Vast and complex terrain exists between the project area and the Sawtooth Wilderness, namely the North Fork and Middle Fork of the Boise River watersheds. These watersheds will have a mitigating effect on smoke entering the wilderness due to the local weather factors having a dispersing effect on smoke. However, one to two hazy days



annually will be experienced as a result of this project, (FEIS, Section 4.3).

### ***Clean Water Act/Water Quality***

Alternative 2 will have a slight, short-term effect on water quality. These effects are limited to increases in sediment delivery as a result of initial road management activities. In the long term, my decision will result in reductions of sediment delivery into streams. My decision will meet the requirements of the Idaho Stream Channel Protection Act and Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (FEIS, Section 4.6).

Alternative 2 will not impact any Source Water and Protection (SWAP) sites, and analysis of this alternative has taken into account the Federal Guidelines for Water Quality Restoration Plan (WQRP) and Protocol, (FEIS, Section 4.6).

### ***Floodplains and Wetlands - Executive Orders 11988 and 11990***

Alternative 2 will result in no significant effects to floodplains and wetlands. Alternative 2 will not propose road construction that would affect wetlands. All existing wetlands would be protected through design features such as Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs), which conforms to Executive Order 11990. The floodplains would also be protected through mitigation measures such as buffer strips that conform to Executive Order 11988.

### ***Endangered Species Act***

Determinations disclosed in the Final EIS have concluded that my decision will have no effect on the Bald Eagle and Ute ladies' - tresses, and may affect, but not likely to adversely effect the Gray Wolf, Canada Lynx, and Bull Trout (FEIS pages IV-36, 37, 65 and 66 and Project Files-Exhibit G).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reviewed the Biological Assessments and concurred with the conclusions in the FEIS (Project Files- Exhibits E 38, 39, and Exhibit G).

To avoid and prevent unforeseen impacts to threatened and endangered species, contract provisions will be included in the timber sale and service contracts, and special parameters or restrictions will be included in the prescribed fire burn plans (FEIS, Sections 2.4 and 2.5).

### ***Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations***

Executive Order 12898 requires all Federal Agencies to make environmental justice part of each agencies mission, by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high, and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority populations or low income populations. There were no identified effects on minority or low-income populations by Alternative 2 during the analysis and public involvement process discussed in detail in the FEIS.

### ***Idaho Forest Practices Act***

The State of Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Practices will be implemented. Timber harvest, pre-commercial thinning, and road management activities will be supervised and monitored to ensure compliance (FEIS, Sections 2.1.2, and 2.5).

### ***Migratory Bird Treaty Act***

The Department of Interior has never defined "take" to include habitat modification. Alternative 2 will comply with the Act, according to past interpretations (Seattle Audubon Society vs. F. Dale Robertson, Portland Audubon vs. Lujan, and Seattle vs. Evans) as well as recent court conclusions (Mahler vs. USFS).

**National Historic Preservation Act - Executive Order 11593**

A cultural resources inventory was completed for the project area in 1999. A total of 46 prehistoric and/or historic sites have been identified within the project area, 28 of which are considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Seventeen sites will not be affected as they are located outside activity (forest condition treatment) areas or in RHCA buffer zones. Eleven sites are within treatment areas and are identified for protection and avoidance. Alternative 2 will have no adverse effect activity provided that the eleven sites are avoided by project activities. The State Historic Preservation Officer has concurred and approved with this determination on 5/24/00 (*Attachment A and Project Files-Exhibit H-3*).

**Environmentally Preferred Alternative**

The environmentally preferred alternative causes the least adverse impact on the biological and physical environment, and best meets the 6 goals of *Section 101* of the National Environmental Policy Act. Identification of the environmentally preferred alternative is required by *40 CFR 1505.2(b)* in a Record of Decision. Social and economic factors are not considered when identifying the environmentally preferred alternative.

Alternative 4 is the environmentally preferred alternative because there would be no short term effects on sediment delivery increase to the Wildgoat-Deadhorse and Pine 6<sup>th</sup> Field HUC Watersheds (*FEIS, Sections 2.7, 4.6 and 4.7*).

**Implementation/Right to Appeal**

The decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at *36 CFR 215.7*. Any written appeal must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of publication of this notice in the *Idaho Statesman*. Appeals must include the information required by *36 CFR 215.14* (Content of a Notice of Appeal), including the stated reasons for appeal. The Appeal Deciding Officer address is:


USDA, Forest Service

Regional Forester, Intermountain Region

324 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Ogden, UT 84401

If no appeal is filed, implementation of this decision may occur within 5 business days after the close of the appeal period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of the appeal disposition

For further information, contact Richard Markley, District Ranger, Idaho City Ranger District, P.O. Box 129, Idaho City, Idaho, 83861; (208) 392-6681.



DAVID D. RITTENHOUSE

Forest Supervisor

Boise National Forest

11/9/00

Date



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